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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by Le Collectif des Femmes Africaines du Hainaut, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 August 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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This is a statement from C.F.A.H. in partnership with Ariel Foundation International (AFI)1. AFI Changemakers is a programme of AFI, organised and led by young people, dedicated to increasing the voice of youth at all levels of the United Nations.

Facilitated by Dr Ariel R. King and Ariel Foundation International, AFI Changemakers strongly believes that young people should be actively engaged in shaping the future they want to see and that their representation is vital to a more inclusive United Nations; a reflection that 50.5% of the world's population are under 30. Young people are trailblazers and represent some of the most forward-thinking and progressive individuals in our society. AFI Changemakers strongly believes that young people should hold a stake in tackling and combating global issues at the highest level. It was this belief that led Ariel Foundation International to hold the inaugural AFI Changemakers-UN Summit in December 2013, to coincide with 25 years of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development. Since this date, AFI Changemakers has held four summits at the United Nations in Geneva, and young people from all over the world have gathered at the Palais des Nations to discuss the human rights and development issues they feel are of extreme importance to future generations, and to develop policy recommendations to be submitted to Human Rights Council and other appropriate bodies for consideration. This statement summarises some of the key human rights issues identified by Changemakers delegates that require urgent attention by the Human Rights Council, namely; slavery and trafficking, mental health and discrimination.

Slavery and Trafficking

Slavery and trafficking has repeatedly held a prominent position on the Changemakers' agenda. Our detailed report, *AFI Changemakers at the UN: Report on Slavery and Human Trafficking*, outlines key challenges and the solutions needed to prevent these crimes and rehabilitate victims. A lack of awareness and harmful public perception is a crucial area that requires strong action. We stress the importance of reducing 'pull' factors by empowering vulnerable communities and strengthening criminal justice systems, as well as the facilitation of independent reviews into the impact of sex and drug laws with a view to reducing demand for trafficking. We also propose tighter controls and safeguards within businesses, particularly multi-national corporations with complex supply chains, and improved education programs that focus on spotting the signs of victims of slavery and trafficking for both the public and frontline staff. Moreover, the continued conflation of illegal migrants and trafficking victims at a domestic level must be addressed and resolved.

Above all, there is the continued prosecution of victims of slavery as they have been forced to carry out illegal activity. We recommend a new internationally recognised legal status for victims of slavery and trafficking, which would allow them to be more easily identified and to access vital rehabilitation facilities, such as mental and physical health care, rather than face prosecution. This status must consider that many cross-border victims of slavery and trafficking will fulfil refugee status and are too vulnerable to return to their original country; these individuals must be granted asylum.

Our delegates are concerned that the term 'modern-day slavery', frequently used in official and legislative documents as an umbrella term to encompass all forms of slavery, dilutes the impact of slavery in the mind of the general public. No other crime has been rebranded in the contemporary era in such a manner. We believe the use of the term 'modern-day slavery' dilutes the issue and erroneously assigns slavery to the historical period. This is a significant causal factor in the widespread belief that contemporary forms of slavery are less serious, or even that they no longer exist, thus contributing to the absence of this issue on political agendas and the denial of safety and justice to victims. As Changemakers we would like

[1] Ariel Foundation International, NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.

slavery in the contemporary period to be viewed with the same gravity as historic slavery; moving away from the term 'modern-day slavery' is a vital step in this process.

Mental Health

The human rights of those suffering from mental disabilities, either permanently or temporarily, are another key concern of AFI Changemakers, and Changemakers delegates at the 2015 *Social Forum on Health and Access to Medicines* were extremely disappointed by the invisibility of mental health on the agenda of this important event. Our in-depth report, *Mental Health: An AFI Changemakers Report to the United Nations*, outlines key recommendations for including mental health in the global health agenda. This report reflects the fact that young people are disproportionately affected by mental health disabilities, and that inadequate treatment, diagnosis and awareness dramatically increase the likelihood of lifelong harm to this vulnerable demographic. One of the critical issues we raise is the inadequacy of the international legal framework concerning mental health. The inconsistent use of terminology, unclear definitions and legal ambiguity within the relevant international legal instruments, particularly the CRPD, continue to have a direct impact upon the human rights of those with mental disabilities.

Crucially, we believe that an improved awareness and understanding of mental disabilities will prevent sufferers from becoming victims of human rights abuses. Our vision is for a world where mental health is rightly afforded the same weight of funding and attention that physical health is, in recognition of the fact that there is no health without mental health.

Discrimination

As passionate young people, AFI Changemakers stands opposed to discrimination in all forms and against all groups. Our report, *AFI Changemakers at the United Nations: Report on Discrimination*, lists discrimination against children, the disabled, migrants, those of different ethnicities, religious groups or social classes, those who identify as LGBT+[2], and discrimination based on gender as areas that require urgent attention. We are deeply concerned by racial and religious discrimination, both within legal systems and institutions. One imperative is the existence of police forces that reflect the religious and ethnic makeup of the communities they serve. We would like to see all frontline officers equipped with body cameras where funds are available to increase accountability. Both these recommendations have been proven to improve relations between law enforcement and the public. Reviews at a national level should ensure sentencing is consistent across ethnic lines and adjusted accordingly if problems are identified.

We are heartened by the improving legal status of LGBT+ people in many parts of the world, with equal marriage in the Americas and Europe reducing legal discrimination in many countries. We are, however, gravely concerned by continued systemic and often violent discrimination against LGBT+ people in other regions. In particular, AFI Changemakers is absolutely opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances, and stresses that its use on LGBT+ people is a grave violation of human rights. It is absolutely imperative that the Human Rights Council continues to advocate for the rights of LGBT+ people at an international level. We would like to see an international policy or framework that addresses all aspects of LGBT+ rights, for example a treaty similar to CERD. As young people we demand an end to global discrimination against LGBT+ individuals and an end to homophobic and transphobic legislation. We recognise that discrimination is always a result of ignorance, and that this must be combatted through education and awareness; anti-discrimination curricula in schools is the most effective way for governments to reduce discrimination at a state level and ensure equality for all social groups.

[2]The term LGBT+ is used here to be inclusive of all persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or identify as any other sexuality or gender

Moving Forward

The views of young people are often dismissed or overlooked, but youth offer the most progressive perspectives on global issues and must be involved in the decision making process, particularly on those issues that affect them the most. We are heartened that the Secretary General has appointed an Envoy on Youth, and that the United Nations has expressed a clear willingness to work with young people. However there are many more steps that need to be taken before young people, from all backgrounds, are truly represented within the UN system.

2015 has already been an exciting year for AFI Changemakers, with the success of our *Social Forum on the Right to Health and Access to Medicines* side-event and *World Health Assembly* Summit. We are currently preparing for our annual Right to Development Summit, where we hope to double the number of participants and open up further access pathways to those for whom the UN would normally be out of reach, as well as running national foreign policy events. We are dedicated to the inclusion of young people at all levels of the decision-making process, and urge the Human Rights Council to ensure that the views of young people are heard. We welcome any opportunities for further involvement.

For full access to our published reports and other information, visit http://www.changemakers-un.org/.

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